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ABSTRACT

A response to a piece of student writing will be most effective if it helps students consciously identify and solve their composing problems, stimulates them to use the response, and helps them to transfer these practiced skills. Furthermore, the response should (1) take place during the process of writing rather than after a piece is completed, (2) be substantive and text-specific rather than purely evaluative and generalized, and (3) be positive and encouraging in tone. By definition, response involves interaction in the same way that conversation involves interaction. If the recipient of the response, in this case the writer, does not hear or read and understand the response to his or her writing, the response cannot be effective. Further, if the writer rejects the response, if it does not serve any function for the writer, then the response is likewise not an effective part of the teaching-learning dialogue. Thus, in evaluating response, it is important to look at whether the writer listens to and understands the response and then at whether the response functions constructively in the learning process. (HOD)

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The Evaluation of, and Response to Student Writing: A Review

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Running head: REVIEW OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

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Abstract

This review addresses instructionally related issues of response and evaluation. After drawing upon theories of oral language acquisition, intellectual skill acquisition and the empirical research on response to student writing, I concluded that there are three basic requirements for effective response: (1) it must help students consciously identify and solve their composing problems; (2) it must stimulate practice; students must use the response (reading or hearing a comment may not in itself lead to practice or use), and (3) it must help students transfer these practiced, problem-solving skills. These conclusions provide an underlying conceptual basis for conclusions from empirical research that suggest that effective response: (1) takes place during the process of writing rather than after a piece is completed, (2) is substantive and text-specific rather than purely evaluative and generalized, and (3) is positive and encouraging in tone. Although positive, substantive response that occurs during the writing process may most easily lead to problem solving, practice, and transfer, I argue that these surface conditions may be important precisely because they lead to the more fundamental activities that make the response effective.

The Evaluation of, and Response to Student Writing: A Review

As Georgia, a freshman in college, says to her writing teacher about the response she receives to her essays in individual writing conferences, "they [conferences] reinforced where...you yourself have problems and make people aware to look for them and you know for future writing." For Georgia, response to her writing helps her increase her skills. She comes to know where her problems are and how to deal with them, both at the moment and in future writings. These conscious, problem solving skills, applied to future writings underlie learning to write.

The question motivating this review is: how can response or feedback best serve the pedagogical end of helping writers increase their skill in writing? Evaluation will be considered only as it functions primarily as response for a learner but not as it serves institutional purposes such as program evaluation or placement.

By examining the conclusions of the research literature on response in tandem with theories of language acquisition and intellectual skill acquisition, I have concluded that there are three basic requirements for effective response: (1) it must help students consciously identify and solve their composing problems; (2) it must stimulate practice; students must use the response (reading or hearing a comment may not in itself lead to practice or use), and (3) it must help students transfer these practiced, problem-solving skills through building networks of retrievable knowledge (Freedman & Greenleaf, 1984). The research literature on response, including pedagogical evaluation, often notes that effective response: (1) takes place during the process of writing

rather than after a piece is completed, (2) is substantive and text-specific rather than purely evaluative and generalized, and (3) is positive and encouraging in tone. Although positive, substantive response that occurs during the writing process may most easily lead to problem solving, practice, and transfer, these surface conditions may be important precisely because they lead to the more fundamental activities that make the response effective.

Before turning either to theory or research, I would like to mention two influential works on teaching, that when taken together, also lead me to this conclusion. First, Shaughnessy (1977), in her insightful remarks about the teaching of syntax to basic writers, emphasizes the importance of practice and transfer in teaching writing generally. She argues forcefully for plentiful "practice" (p. 87) and for "reinforcement rather than redundancy in language instruction" throughout the curriculum (p. 88). More recently, Hillocks (1984), in his meta-analysis of empirical studies of the relative effectiveness of different methods of teaching writing, finds approaches that include problem solving are by far the most effective.

Theories Related to Learning to Write

It seems important to look to theories of oral language learning and intellectual skill development to inform studies of written language acquisition because written language acquisition is both a form of language acquisition and a form of intellectual skill development. Most theories of oral language acquisition suggest that to acquire oral language, children "use what people

say to form hypotheses about how different ideas are expressed in the language they are acquiring." Children test "how well they are understood by others" (Clark & Clark, 1977, 336-337). If children also are to use hypothesis testing strategies to learn written language, they need first to know how their readers understand and respond. Just as the listener-speaker interaction is crucial to hypothesis testing when children learn to speak, the reader-writer interaction must lead to hypothesis testing so that children will learn to write. Hypothesis testing is a form of practice for solving communication problems; transfer of refined hypotheses to new composing problems depends on feedback.

Since writing is a more conscious activity than speech, and is largely learned in school rather than at home, it becomes important to examine theories of the acquisition of school-type intellectual skills for additional insight about how writing may be acquired and the role response plays in that acquisition. Diverse theories of intellectual skill development, from Vygotsky (1978) to Anderson (1982) point out the central role of response or feedback in the development of intellectual skills. As when acquiring other intellectual skills, learning writers need to distinguish when they are performing well from when they are not, and they need to know how to take corrective action when their writing is not proceeding well; in other words, they must possess metacognitive skills (Brown, 1981; Flavell, 1981). Further, the notion that writers solve composing problems (Flower & Hayes, 1977; Flower & Hayes, 1980; Hayes & Flower, 1980) grows out of the problem solving literature that was built around how learners solve problems in other domains (Newell & Simon, 1972). This

literature too suggests the importance of practice with solving composing problems and feedback that will lead to transfer to new situations.

What is Response?

What does response or feedback to writing consist of? Looked at broadly, response includes feedback or reaction to something the writer has already produced. It is important to remember two points: (1) response to non-written plans and ideas for writing is as much response as response to writing itself, but (2) teaching, in preparation for writing before the writing process begins, although also probably key in learning and related to response as it lays the groundwork for how response will be understood, is not, in itself, response.

Internal or self-response is a key part of the writing process that leads to revision and that deserves to be studied as part of the writing process. Following from theories of metacognition, it may be that part of the process during which the writer comes to understand the external response as well as other input relevant to learning to write. However, internal response, being part of the writing process, will not be addressed directly in this review.

Response can be direct or indirect. Direct response occurs as feedback to a particular writer's piece of writing and is directed to that writer. In schools, direct response commonly occurs as teachers' written comments to a writer and orally during individual writing conferences. Indirect response often occurs during group processes. Indirect response, not directed

to the recipient, functions for the writer-recipient in a similar way to direct response. Indirect response occurs, for example, in peer response groups when John responds directly to Amy's writing but when Dan sees a similarity between his writing and Amy's and is able to apply John's response to Amy to his own writing. Whole class writing instruction may also include indirect response.

Besides being direct or indirect, response can be explicit or implicit. Directness has to do with who the intended audience for the response is; explicitness has to do with how the response is given. Explicit response is clearly response; a teacher writes comments or uses writing conferences to help a child through the writing process. Implicit response occurs when a listener or reader lets a speaker or writer know how a message is understood. Implicit response is most akin to the natural feedback children receive from their listeners when they learn oral language. Dialogue writing, in which a more experienced writer's pieces serve as models for a less experienced writer, provides a prototypical example of implicit response.

Purves (1984) notes that the respondent can take different roles when giving response, can respond for different purposes, from common reader to proofreader/editor to gatekeeper to diagnostician/therapist. He further suggests that the reader and writer need to remain conscious of the possible roles and that in the classroom role-taking needs to be made explicit.

What is Effective Response According to the Research

Since researchers often study one type of response at a

time, I will organize this review by types of classroom-based response events: dialogue writing; written comments on students' writing; individual conferences and peer response groups in the classroom; and computer response. However, I want to stress that it is the coordination of a variety of types of response that most likely leads to learning. As Brannon and Knoblach (1982) suggest, the method of response is not the critical variable in making response effective or ineffective. It is also important to reiterate here that theories of language acquisition and skill development point toward a conclusion that for response or evaluation to lead to learning, they must lead to practice and they must set up a learning interaction that leads to transfer.

The review that follows will not be comprehensive; rather, the aim is to select key studies that represent central trends in each area.

Dialogues in Writing

Some teachers and researchers have set up oral-like writing situations on the premise that writing is best acquired if it is thought of as an extension of oral language and if the response to written language is similar to the response that supports childrens' acquisition of oral language. Students write regularly in dialogue journals to their teacher who writes back (Staton, 1981), or students write letters to older classmates and other adults who write back (Heath & Branscombe, in press), or to peers (Reil, 1983).

These natural communication environments encourage students to engage in functional writing events, writing for real

audiences to accomplish tangible goals. Traditional school-type tasks are considered contrived rather than "real," and are eschewed. The return messages do not necessarily contain direct corrections or comments on the student's writing; rather they function as models in the communication situation. Response is implicit; the return message gives clues to the effectiveness of the communication.

This type of implicit response, which is tailored to a particular type of school-writing, has been found especially useful in providing a transition into literacy and if planned, into formal, academic literacy. Staton (1981) and Heath and Branscombe (in press) have found that under such instruction young writers produce more complete well-formed prose across time if they regularly see models of more expert writing. Reil's peer dialogues have not been shown to yield overall gains in writing quality. Heath and Branscombe's older writers seem to benefit by a sequenced set of communication tasks that lead them to produce less personal, more abstract forms of writing and that encourage them and their teacher to investigate and analyze the students' language at home and in school. Also, in the Heath and Branscombe study, older writers do comment explicitly on younger writers' writing.

The dialogue makes sure that the writer <u>practices</u> but not necessarily that the writer takes the model correspondence, that is the implicit response of the teacher or other more experienced writer, into account. In these studies, the entire learning environment is rich with response. Thus, the dialogue writing alone may not cause the improvements. Heath and Branscombe

suggest that the students' and teacher's close attention to language (that is response to language) as the subject of the dialogues is equally important. Also, research on this approach has been conducted predominantly with young children (Staton, 1981) and with older students who have experienced failure in the normal school setting (Reil, 1983; Heath & Branscombe, in press), and with non native and deaf speakers (Staton, 1984). The following remain to be studied: (1) the relative effectiveness of dialogue writing compared to other forms of response, (2) sequenced dialogue activities with younger children, and (3) a dialogue approach with older writers in the educational mainstream. Although teachers report using the technique successfully with a variety of types of writers, no research substantiates these reports.

Teachers' Written Comments, Including Grading

Written comments from the teacher are perhaps the most usual type of individualized response that students receive about their writing. Written comments are part of the school institution and seem to be a possible way, sometimes the only possible way, for teachers to differentiate response for individual writers. Hirsch (1977) optimistically asserts "that very probably written comments will turn out to be the most effective teaching device of all" (p. 159). Hirsch notes their advantages for individualizing instruction and for making a permanent record for the writer's reference. However, the effectiveness of written comments have been much studied, with discouraging, although in some ways inconclusive, results.

Researchers have examined the tone, placement, and substance of written comments on the final versions of student writing, all in hopes of finding out how to make comments maximally helpful. Studies of naturally occurring written comments on final versions reveal that these comments are destructive. First, teachers write comments from the point of view of an arbitor of standards and draw attention away from the student's writing and toward the teacher's purposes for commenting (Sommers, 1982; Lees, 1979; Gere & Stevens, in press). The teacher's comments are not specific to a student's piece of writing; rather they could be "rubber-stamped from text to text" (Searle & Dillon, 1980; Sommers, 1982, p. 152). Teachers write these general comments mostly about form and mechanics (Harris, 1977; Searle & Dillon, 1980). The teachers frequently write comments that conflict with one another (Sommers, 1982). The teachers frequently write comments that are "mean spirited" in tone (Harris, 1977; Sommers, p. 149, 1982). In other words, teachers' comments do not individualize instruction, are confusing, and are mean. No wonder they do not inspire students to practice new skills. Such comments belong in the trash cans where students so frequently deposit them, before their teachers' eyes.

Those who have tried to determine whether the tone of comments affects student writing or student attitudes (Taylor & Hoedt, 1966; Seidman, 1967; and Clarke, 1969), conclude that tone does not affect the quality of students' writing but that positive comments engender positive attitudes (Gee, 1972).

Studies that assess how students understand naturally occurring comments reveal, not surprisingly, that students

understand very little (Butler 1980; Hahn, 1981; Schwartz, 1983).

Comments that occur during the process are found to be more useful. College freshmen who receive extensive comments and then revisetheir papers write significantly better at the end of a term than students who receive few comments and do not revise (Buxton, 1958). Buxton offers encouragement to the teacher who labors over written comments to students, especially if the student will use or practice with the comments to revise the paper.

Between draft teacher comments help student writers achieve more fluency and more support in their final drafts (Beach, 1979). Longer comments on drafts are more helpful than shorter ones if they are coupled with instruction in pre-writing (Hillocks, 1982).

Case studies of four college freshmen who are learning to write reveal that these students prefer explicit comments on drafts and are stimulated by them to revise more (Ziv, 1981). They would like the teacher to correct their problems for them so that they do not have to correct the problems themselves, a counterproductive wish. Interestingly, some of these students are confused because their teachers' comments contradict their peers'. Like Hillocks who shows a positive interaction between prewriting instruction and comments, Ziv suggests that it is important to look at the interactions between different sources of response while students are learning to write.

To recap, no studies of comments written after a paper is finished indicate that these comments are helpful to student

learners. However, none of these studies has ever examined comments that expert writing teachers would agree are well formulated to teach specific problem solving skills and to provide for transfer of those skills, and none has placed comments in an instructional context where they must be used. Since teachers continue to spend so much of their time commenting on student papers, studies are needed that can at least examine the value of well-formed comments on final versions of students' writing. Such comments would demand, or at least encourage practice with solving composing problems and would plan for transfer of skills to new occasions.

Studies of comments written to students during the process of writing show more promising results. At least for these comments, students practice carrying out the suggestions embedded in them. Such practice, I have suggested, must be embedded in the teaching situation that includes response if response is to have any effect.

Peer Response Groups and Individual Writing Conferences

Just as students learn to write by composing pieces which serve different functions (Britton et al., 1976), response to writing can function differently for the learner (Purves, 1984). Most of the research on peer response groups and individual conferences examines how these events function as response events. The implicit response in dialogue writing is modelled exactly after response that occurs naturally to oral language production; written response on student writing follows the traditional pedagogical model of corrective feedback. However, peer response groups (including peer tutoring such as that

described by Bruffee, 1973) and individual conferences seem to be designed specifically to provide instructional scaffolding during the writing process, either from the teacher or from peers. To date, most research on these types of response has examined how the scaffolding gets built, not how effective it is in the teaching-learning process. The latter research is much needed.

Peer response groups are set up by classroom writing teachers and generally are designed to provide support for writers during the writing process. Participating in the group allows the writer both to receive response and to play the role of the responder and thereby presumably to better understand what that role entails. Thompson (1981) offers evidence that if students are formally trained to evaluate one another's writing, their own writing improves.

Conferences occur when teachers talk individually to students about their writing. These individual and sometimes small teacher-led group meetings are discussed most frequently as part of the elementary and university curriculum. Those who write about conferences generally agree that they are effective. Graves (1983) stresses that response in-process must not take ownership of the piece away from the writer; in other words, it should function as a scaffold, not as a new building. On a related note, Freedman (1981), at the college level, urges the teacher to listen to the student and allow the conference to function as a two-way interaction rather than a one-way directive from the teacher.

Teachers and theorists who write about peer response groups

and conferences offer wise words for how to make the groups or conferences function effectively based on their extensive thought and experience. For advice on conducting peer groups, see the work of Moffett (1968), Murray (1968), Macrorie (1970), Moffett & Wagoner, (1976) Elbow (1973 and 1981), and Healy (1980), to name a few. For advice on conducting conferences, see the work of Graves (1983) and Kamler (1980) at the elementary level, and Murray (1968), and Garrison (1974) at the university level.

As I noted earlier, research on conferences and peer response groups focuses on how the groups or individual meetings function rather than on their effects on student writing. Gere and Stevens (in press) study peer response groups in grades 5, 8, and 11. The groups they study are modelled after Elbow's (1973) "teacherless writing group." Student writers read their paper to the group twice while group members listen and take notes. The group members then let the writer know the impression his or her language makes. The writer is not supposed to speak other than to ask for clarification.

Gere and Stevens are interested in whether students evaluate one another and whether their comments to one another stimulate revision. They code the group talk to indicate whether it informs, directs, or elicits. Students spend most time informing others about writing. Much of the informing involves positive comments about the writing. This talk about writing generally serves to tell the writer how the reader/listener is making meaning of the text. Gere and Stevens contrast this type of student interaction about writing with highly generalized teacher response (such as that found in the studies of teacher's written

comments). What they find students doing is an explicit version of the implicit response writers receive in dialogue writing. Gere and Stevens see student response as in-forming the text and teacher response as aimed at making the text con-form to an abstract paradigm of "good" writing. Gere and Stevens are able to connect revisions to group discussion; however, the role the response from the group plays in skill development is unknown. Certainly, peer group response promotes practice and gives the students an opportunity to use and enrich their sense of what they are learning in the rest of the writing curriculum.

It would be helpful if future research on peer response groups would examine whether peer responses seem to help students transfer what they learn for their immediate revision tasks to other writing situations. Since Gere and Stevens only study groups organized according to Elbow's 1972 plan, it would also be helpful to have studies of peer response groups organized differently. Further, more information is needed about how the groups function with respect to the rest of the teaching in the classroom. At this point, it seems important to recall Ziv's (1984) finding that her writers were confused by the differences between the feedback of their teacher and the feedback from their peers.

Systematic studies of the conference have begun to emerge during the last decade (Jacobs & Karliner, 1977; Carnicelli, 1980; Reigstad, 1980; Graves, 1983; Freedman & Katz, in press; Freedman & Sperling, in press; Brannon, 1984; Walters, 1984). At the elementary level, Graves emphasizes the importance of

"helping children speak" during the conference (p. 97) by arranging the physical setting so that the child does not feel intimidated, by waiting for children to answer questions, by structuring the conference so that its structure will be predictible for the child, by listening to the child, and by looking for the child's potentials. The teacher must make the conversation cohere from the child's point of view, must ask questions the child can answer, and must help the child focus. Although the child may provide the lead in the conversation, the teacher is responsible for following through in a focused way so that the conversation will be productive for the child. Graves indicates that certain types of teacher questions teach better than others. These are questions that first open up the floor for the student to initiate topics of concern and then questions that follow those topics and that make the child aware of the procedures that he or she needs to follow next. In addition, questions help the child clarify abstract concepts that underlie writing (Graves gives an example of a child being led to understand the meaning of "information" (p. 112-114)). Finally, Graves points to questions that point the child to solve composing problems outside the conference; such questions begin to remove the scaffolds provided by the conference, and push the child to practice with skills learned during instruction.

At the university level, Jacobs and Karliner (1977) and Freedman and Katz (in press) note that the conference can grant the student the unusual opportunity to converse with the teacher, in similar ways to everyday, informal conversation. Here language can be used to reinforce for the student what is

happening in the classroom and to allow the teacher to see where the student is having difficulty with writing. Walters (1984) notes that conferences can serve three functions for the student: as socialization into interpretive communities, as a literacy event, and as pedagogical conversation.

Through the conference conversation the teacher has the opportunity to individualize. Freedman (1981) and Freedman and Sperling (in press) note that students let teachers know what their individual concerns are; teachers then either help the students with those concerns or direct them toward new problems to consider and help them learn to seek solutions. Not surprisingly, Freedman and Sperling find that their case study teacher who was selected for her expertise in giving conferences is more successful in helping higher achieving students than in helping lower achieving students. Classroom communication problems common for lower achieving students can easily become magnified in the conference.

No studies have linked conferences alone to transfer. Certainly, conferences that occur during the writing process encourage practice and transfer. Again Brannon (1984) urges that we examine the conference in the context of the rest of the writing curriculum.

Computer Response

Computers are now being programmed to respond to student writing; furthermore, the computer, which is often anthropomorphized with its command structure, seems to interact with writers during composing. Some have suggested that the

computer itself, because of how it works, helps young writers think of an audience that will read their writing as they compose (Daiute, 1983). Above and beyond what the computer does by its existence, the text editors and word processors that writers use allow the writer to compose and revise differently than they do with pencil and paper. For this reason, composition researchers have speculated that the convenience of revising when using the editor might affect writers' composing processes. Recent studies, however, have shown these hypotheses to be naive (Bridwell, Ross, & Nancarrow, in press; Daiute, 1983 and in press). Writers use the computer to help them achieve their goals and for some students the goal may be to revise less (Bridwell et al.). Daiute (in press) also finds that for young writers, mastering typing and the commands of the word processor add burdens during writing and cause the writers to write worse rather than better; however, Levin et al. (in press) suggest the opposite, that under the right instructional conditions the computer can be facilitative for youngsters. Levin and his colleagues advocate combining computer response with collaborative and dialogic writing situations that also provide another kind of response (see section on dialogue writing).

Besides the editor, some researchers have built environments for writers that can provide them with response and assistance, at their command. For example, WANDAH, which was designed by von Blum and her associates (1984) contains planning prompts as well as revising help and an editor. Teachers and peers can even write comments in the student writer's texts. Others have designed programs to help writers throughout the process. Some

programs are designed to help writers generate their ideas by responding positively to students as they generate more and more ideas (for example, Burns & Culp, 1980; MacDonald et al., 1982; Collins et al., in press). Other programs are meant to respond to student writers to help them revise. These include everything from the spelling checkers which are available on most systems to style analyzers which count sentence length, "be" verbs, passives and the like. They also include programs of questions which help the writer evaluate the text produced so far (for examples see MacDonald et al., 1982; Collins et al., in press; Heidorn et al., 1982; Woodruff et al., 1981; von Blum, 1984; Collins et al., in press; Daiute, in press). Research on Writer's Workbench shows that it teaches students skills that allow them to perform better on editing tests (Kieter & Smith, 1983; Frase et al., in press).

Woodruff, Bereiter, and Scardamalia (1981) and Daiute (in press), who experiment with using the computer as a listener, a cue-giver during the composing process, hypothesize that such prompting can help young writers become conscious of their cognitive activities (Brown, 1981). Woodruff, Bereiter, and Scardamalia (1981) find the opposite for sixth graders. The initial computer prompts lead to a low-level, "what next" composing strategy and prompts designed to lead to more global thinking interfere with students' composing. Daiute finds that after 9 to 12 year-old children write using prompts, they make more word-level revisions, but they do less rewriting or revision which involves larger segments of text. The quality ratings are not affected. Most interesting of all, two case studies show

that the computer aids some students and hinders others. Daiute, with a more extensive analysis, also finds that the computer's explicit guides for self-monitoring transfer to later independent monitoring ability. Such findings have also been reported for similar prompting off the computer (see Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982).

Conclusions

The mode of the response seems less important than the following principles, that as Sperling (1984) stresses, must be coordinated throughout the curriculum.

1. Emphasize development of conscious problem solving to deal with individual composing problems; help students learn to recognize problems and to selectively focus their attention on their key problems.
2. Stimulate practice with problem solving through revision and whatever other techniques can be used (See Hillocks, 1984, for examples of other techniques).
3. Encourage transfer both through practice and through building explicit knowledge networks that can be accessed in order to call up a rich set of procedures for solving problems (See Freedman & Greenleaf, 1984, for more detail about how explicit language can promote transfer).

By definition response involves interaction, in the same way that conversation involves interaction. Response involves a responder and an active recipient of the response. If the recipient of the response, in this case the writer, does not hear or read and understand the response to his or her writing, the

response cannot be effective. Further, if the writer rejects the response, if it does not serve any function for the writer, then the response is likewise not an effective part of the teaching learning dialogue. Thus, in evaluating response, it is important to look at whether the writer listens to and understands the response and then at whether the response functions constructively in the learning process.

The issues are not whether the response occurs during the process or on a final version, not whether the response is or is not evaluative but whether it leads to practice and the learning of transferable skills. As Georgia says, "I know a lot of people, they get the essay back, who will always no matter what you said [say] fine and like I understand, [but who]...really don't understand. And don't bother to come in and say well, what do you mean." Another student, Charles voices a typical complaint: "the instructor writes on the paper that this is wrong, you really don't know why it was wrong." He then goes on to say what every teacher hopes to hear, "But then when you tell me why and you know how I can change it and stuff like that helps out a lot."

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